

Scripture Texts
Psalm 100
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
November 21st 2010
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As we launch ourselves into what feels like the busiest time of the year, frantically cleaning our homes for out of town family and guests, smelling the aroma of a basted turkey and fresh baked pies, and dig through our attics, garages or basements for the garland and lights, it is easy for us to switch into auto pilots. The endless grocery and gift lists, family dynamics, and demands that everything be “perfect” can be more than challenging, budgets that challenge our hearts into reflecting about what giving means, loss that hangs heavy over the dinner table can overwhelm us into not experiencing the moments of gratitude and grace that are right in front of us.

There is an old story or fable told about a far-off land which was ruled by a tyrant.

The tyrant had an ironclad grip over all parts of his kingdom, except for one frustrating area. He was unable to destroy the people's belief in God.

He summoned his counselors and put the question to them:
"Where can I hide God so that the people will end up forgetting about God?"

One counselor suggested that God be hidden on the dark side of the moon. This proposal was debated for some time, but voted down because it was believed that one day scientists would discover a means of space travel and God would end up being found again.

Another advisor to the tyrant came up with idea of burying God beneath the depths of the ocean floor. This was voted down for basically the same reason - it was felt that scientific advancement would lead to the discovery of God even beneath the depths of the ocean floor.

Finally the oldest and wisest of the counselors had a flash of insight. "I know", he said, "why don't we hide God where no one will ever think to look?" He explained, "If we hide God in the ordinary events of people's everyday lives they'll never find God."

And so it was done - and they say that people are still looking for God - even today.

(Altered to include inclusive language for God. Story found: <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/c-thansesn.php>)

At this time of year it is so easy to lose God in the everyday events of our lives because we become overwhelmed with the extra details. Today we have an opportunity to pause and enjoy what God is doing, has done and will do in our lives and in the world.

This morning the ringing of the bells, the voices of the choirs, and sounds of the organ fill our ears and hearts with the joyful noise we offer to God in thanksgiving that God is good and it is good to be God's people.

In the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy the people of Israel are told what they should say when they bring their offerings to the temple. They are to say:

"The Lord brought us into this place, and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first fruit of the ground, which you, O God, have given me."

The Lord has brought us into this place.

This is the message of all scripture - that everything around us, and everything that we are and everything that we have is a gift of God. And at this time of year we can get swept away very quickly in the extra activities, parties, and dinner plate and overlook the simplicity of God presence right in front of us.

Simple.

Sounds counterintuitive to the amount of planning it takes to coordinate the dinner, family arrivals, football games and next day early morning shopping trips. The Pilgrims arrived in 1620, sailed into Plymouth Harbor after exploring several alternative sites, built a settlement, and cleared some land. The New England winter was harsher than anything they had ever experienced. They survived on the meager rations they had brought along. Half of them fell ill and died. Every family experienced the loss of a child, a parent, a grandparent. In the spring they planted crops with the help of natives who showed them how to fertilize. By harvest time, they knew they could survive at least another winter on the corn, squash, beans, peas, and barley to brew beer, which they drank in impressive quantities.

Their leader, Governor William Bradford, declared a “time to rejoice together after a more special manner,” sent four men “fowling” to bring ducks and geese from Plymouth Harbor. In addition to poultry and vegetables, there were shellfish, cod, and striped bass. Contrary to the favorite Victorian paintings of the event, they did not sit at a long table covered with a white linen tablecloth, praying as the natives stood around watching. They stood, throwing pieces of meat into stew pots that simmered on spits over open fires. They ate with their fingers and knives; forks didn’t appear for another seventy years.

There probably was no turkey. The New England wild turkey was lean and fast and difficult to shoot. What they had an abundance of was venison. One hundred natives showed up with five freshly killed deer.

Their Governor Bradford wrote in his journal, "The whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue, if they looked behind them there was the mighty ocean. What could sustain them but the spirit of God and his grace?"

They were, of course, people of the Bible, Puritans who were seeking a place to practice their faith in freedom without persecution. They knew about ancient Israel's harvest festival, how Israel, at the end of a successful harvest, thanked God for the bounty of creation—and also for delivering them from their captivity, giving them their freedom as a people.

That is the biblical root of Thanksgiving. The Pilgrim fathers and mothers read their own story in Israel's older, ancient story. God is thanked for the harvest, but also for something more, something not actually dependent on a successful harvest: namely God's presence and grace and love. The Pilgrims thanked God for enough corn to survive the winter. But they were also thanking God for the guiding presence they had experienced, the strong hand they had felt leading them, and the love that had sustained them through lonely, cold, dark nights, even as they were burying their loved ones.

The Pilgrims understood that God is to be thanked and praised regardless of what is going on around us—in good times and not so good times. And that is the biblical witness as well. To a people about to be attacked, defeated, and exiled, the prophet Isaiah wrote:

Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name. . . .
Sing praises to the Lord,
Shout aloud and sing for joy.

"Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth," the psalmist echoes.